

# Towards a shared prosperity: co-designing solutions in Lebanon's spaces of displacement

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*Abstract:* This article argues that a citizen science and participatory planning approach to infrastructure can lead to significant outcomes for improving quality of life, as well as building pathways to shared prosperity in diverse urban environments. Drawing on examples from Lebanon—a country that is heavily impacted by displacement from neighbouring Syria—the article argues that the practice of co-design creates opportunities for social inclusion and engagement that are often missing from top-down infrastructural development projects. This point is illustrated through the case studies of Ziad Kalthoum's (2018) film *Taste of Cement* and a participatory spatial intervention organised by a British Academy-funded project in which the authors took part. Focussing specifically on the dimension of subjectivity, the article claims that participatory planning that engages both hosts and refugees can encourage collective aspirations and affirmation of difference rather than the social divisions and negative stereotyping that often result from infrastructural exclusions.

*Keywords:* Infrastructure, subjectivity, participation, citizen science, refugees, diversity.

What does it take to bring people together in socially fragmented and culturally diverse urban settings? How can communities affected by displacement and immigration establish a sense of shared prosperity? What is the role of infrastructure in driving or hindering prosperity in such communities? In what follows, we address these questions within the Lebanese context of large-scale displacement. Lebanon has a long history of receiving refugees and migrants. Over the past century, it has been the recipient of multiple waves of displaced people, including Armenians, Palestinians, Iraqis, and since 2011 also a large number of Syrians. At the present moment, with approximately one million registered Syrian refugees (and many more who are unregistered), Lebanon has the highest number of per capita refugees in the world—approximately one quarter of its population (UNHCR 2018).

The large influx of Syrians since 2011 has had a major impact on Lebanon, with most politicians, academics and members of the public agreeing that the rapid arrival of so many people has exerted enormous ‘pressures’ or ‘strain’ on the country’s job market, educational system, political resilience and public services (see Abid *et al.* 2017). In Lebanon, as in any other country, solutions to the challenges presented by displacement and migration must be approached on multiple levels simultaneously. On one level, national policies that deliver jobs, an effective educational system and improved public infrastructure are absolutely crucial for dealing with large-scale displacement. A primary focus on this level, however, runs the risk of boosting national performance metrics without due consideration of how these metrics succeed or fail to translate into good quality of life for people and communities around the country. For this reason, we argue in this article that solutions to displacement should also focus on delivering prosperity for the public at large by prioritising the concerns and issues that matter to people in their everyday lives.

Our use of the term ‘prosperity’ requires some clarification here. Prosperity is a challenging concept to define precisely because it is so diverse and open to interpretation (much like other concepts in the social sciences such as ‘justice’, ‘value’ and ‘democracy’). Recent academic and policy discourses have referred to prosperity as our collective vision of progress and argued that prosperity is something that we as a society need to rethink and redefine (e.g., Cassiers 2015, Jackson 2011, Moore 2015, Moore & Woodcraft 2019). The dominant vision of prosperity in today’s global economy, according to proponents of this argument, is heavily centred on generating economic growth and wealth (Jackson 2011, Stiglitz *et al.* 2010). This, in turn, is problematic firstly because infinite economic growth is not environmentally sustainable, and, secondly because aggregate economic gains often fail to deliver on better quality of life and wellbeing for society as a whole. The focus, according to this view, should not be on a narrow version of prosperity as wealth, but rather on a wider and more dynamic version of prosperity as that which matters for living a good life in a sustainable fashion—health and wellbeing, a clean environment, capacity-building and education, equality and inclusion, and cohesive communities, in addition to good jobs and economic resources (Moore 2015).

This agenda for redefining prosperity resonates with recent work on urban economics and infrastructural development. Ewald Engelen *et al.* (2017), for example, have recently made a case for a renewed effort to build ‘grounded cities’—cities which attribute less importance to economic growth and competition, and put more emphasis on strengthening the ‘foundational economy’ of goods and services that improve the collective welfare of local residents. In other words, ‘[t]he solution [to infrastructural issues and inadequate services] is not growth, jobs and vague hope for redistribution of income, but practical reorganisation for material security in a grounded city’

(Engelen *et al.* 2017: 419). The concept of prosperity, as we use it in this article, is closely aligned with this agenda because inclusive and reliable infrastructures and services are fundamental for good quality of life. In addition to this, however, our concept of prosperity also includes a dimension of subjectivity in which people feel valued and valuable, capable of making a contribution, and optimistic—at least to some degree—about the future to come. Being prosperous entails recognition of one's value as well as optimism (however modest) for a worthwhile future.

Beyond these general principles, however, the meaning of prosperity and the pathways of achieving it depend on the histories, cultures and challenges that are specific to different countries and communities. The same goes for the notion of building a 'grounded city' which 'has to start by engaging city specifics and delivering locally relevant betterment' (Engelen *et al.* 2017: 419). In the case of Lebanon, the still-ongoing urban recovery following the Civil War (1975–1990), and the more recent wave of displacement from Syria, shape the local parameters of what prosperity is and how it can be achieved. Infrastructure is an important element in this context because both challenges have required—and still require—initiatives to develop and strengthen infrastructures across the country. The crucial questions, however, are whether and how such initiatives can forge pathways to prosperity for all, especially against the backdrop of rather challenging social, economic and political circumstances.

As the historian John Chalcraft wrote prior to the Syrian crisis, Lebanon's approach to post-war reconstruction has involved a major trade-off between 'physical' and 'social' infrastructure:

The neo-liberal economic thinking behind the reconstruction of Lebanon ... demanded that Lebanon, in order to attract investment, needed a 'state-of-the-art physical infrastructure,' and at least an 'acceptable social infrastructure.' The physical infrastructure not only took priority in quality but also in timing, and in fact, by the mid-1990s, when the government turned its attention to the social infrastructure—housing, education, and the like—a yawning budget deficit prevented the execution of even the merely adequate projects that had been planned (Chalcraft 2009: 155).

This approach was arguably successful in some ways. Investing in physical infrastructure (including essentials such as roads, an international airport, and electricity plants, as well as luxury hotels and high-end construction projects in Beirut) returned the country to relative economic stability at the aggregate level with controlled inflation and incoming investments from the Gulf. At the same time, however, the recovery process has been heavily criticised for exacerbating income inequalities, displacing local residents, rupturing community relations, and destroying heritage architecture to build luxury tower blocks (e.g., Hourani 2015, Khechen 2018, Sawalha 2010).

Part of the problem here was that the planning and development of the reconstruction projects were not only heavily concentrated in Beirut but also top-heavy, with little regard for the needs, experiences, and aspirations of local residents. As Aseel Sawalha's (2010) ethnography of Beirut's seaside neighbourhood of Ain al-Mraiseh shows, local residents felt resentment and frustration towards the reconstruction process, but they did not do so because the latter was aiming to attract foreign investment and turn Beirut into a modern global city (in fact Beirut had been precisely such a city prior to the Civil War and many Beirutis took pride in this history); what angered local residents instead, was the fact that they were not included, and played no role, in the vision of reconstruction promoted by the state and the Solidere company which was in charge of the process. Within the post-war recovery, 'development and modernity meant creating a cosmopolitan global city, in the hope of attracting investors and tourists, but at the same time it excluded its vulnerable residents from its future urban plans' (Sawalha 2010: 131; see also Makdisi 1997).

The concept of prosperity has useful analytical potential in contexts of development where there is a deficit of local benefits. This is because it can help us understand and assess the impact of urban development in ways that focus on quality of life beyond aggregate economic growth that may or may not trickle down to the less well-off. However, to have relevance at the level of neighbourhoods such as Ain al-Mraiseh, prosperity must be operationalised as a locally specific concept and defined by the experiences and concerns of local residents—something which has not been given adequate attention by existing studies on the topic. The vast majority of existing prosperity indices present data either at the aggregate national level (e.g., OECD Better Life Index 2017, Social Progress Index 2018, Legatum Prosperity Index 2018) or at the aggregate city level (e.g., UN Habitat City Prosperity Initiative 2019), without attention to differences within countries and cities. While we acknowledge that both of these levels of inquiry are of critical importance because areas within countries and cities often share common challenges, we maintain that understanding prosperity at the level of smaller locales is also crucial, particularly in places where urban regeneration and infrastructural development are taking place (see Moore & Woodcraft 2019). This latter level is fundamental for operationalising prosperity into a concrete concept based on people's concerns, rather than an abstract and loose theoretical construct about what should be measured at the nationwide or citywide levels.

**PROSPERITY IN THE CONTEXT OF URBAN DISPLACEMENT**

One way to rethink and redefine prosperity is therefore to engage in greater depth with locally specific needs and experiences. However, in the context of displacement and migration, what must be rethought and redefined is not just what it means to be prosperous, but also how the other—the displaced person, the migrant, the stranger—fits within the project of building a better future. This is particularly relevant for Lebanon, not just because of the current ‘crisis’ of Syrian refugees, but also because of the country’s long history of labour migration from Syria and elsewhere, as well as displacement from Palestine, and internal displacement of Lebanese communities during the Civil War and the 2006 Lebanon war. Moreover, Lebanon’s long history of emigration and large diaspora, make emigration a central theme in the way Lebanese people define their relationship to national belonging. Therefore, coexistence and cohabiting with strangers is deeply embedded in Lebanon’s social and political fabric. The Lebanese case, however, is not unique but rather resonates with other contexts where recipient countries and cities have to adapt to the impact of migration and diversity. In today’s world on the move, the way in which prosperity is imagined is inevitably defined by specific visions of self and other, as well as imagined possibilities (or impossibilities) of building a shared future with strangers, even in the face of difference, disagreement and dissent.

One response to displacement and migration that has become all too familiar recently is the populist, protectionist, response. Numerous countries throughout the world—not just in Europe and North America, but also in the Middle East and elsewhere—are focussing on protecting the prosperity of those who have it by keeping others out, either physically or socially and economically. In other words, the inclusion of foreigners in national life is seen as an impingement or an obstacle to building a better society. Recent critiques of this argument have pointed out that the presence of refugees can lead to economic benefits for host communities (e.g., Betts & Collier 2017, Betts *et al.* 2017), and that migration can also lead to vibrant and cohesive urban communities, as the case of London has shown (Mintchev & Moore 2017, 2018). This means that diversity can become the foundation of a prosperous society, and not an obstacle to it as proponents of the nationalist protectionist response often assume. But the question of whether (and how) countries, cities and communities can build shared prosperity depends on multiple variables, such as the scale of migration, the educational levels and cultural backgrounds of newcomers, and not least of all, the governance practices and the types of infrastructure through which migration and diversity are managed.

The question of how particular visions of prosperity come about and how they become embedded within societies needs to be examined on a number of scales with

reference to political, economic, and cultural governance. Top-level decisions about anything from legal rights for refugees and migrants to job-creation strategies and funding for urban infrastructure are crucial for shaping what kind of society people co-inhabit; but, as argued earlier, equally important is the way in which people manage their urban environments at the local level in everyday life. Attentiveness to subjectivity and agency here is key for understanding how inclusive prosperity can be achieved in contexts of displacement. The way people relate to one another in everyday life depends on a range of subjective factors, including psychic representations, cognitive and sensory perceptions, and affective and emotional orientations towards others and the world. It also depends, however, on the kinds of practices, actions, and initiatives that communities engage in as a means of establishing and reproducing specific configurations of self–other relations. The ways in which urban infrastructures are designed—as well as the practices through which they are developed—play a definitive role in how people experience their position in the city and their relationship to others. As Ash Amin writes,

urban infrastructure (layout of public spaces, physical infrastructure, public services, technological and built environment, visual and symbolic culture) ... [has] resonance as a ‘collective unconscious’ working on civic feelings, including those toward the stranger. ... [I]nterventions in the urban infrastructure guided by principles of multiplicity and common access have an important part to play in an urban politics of living with difference (2012: 63).

In the Lebanese context of Syrian displacement, refugees/strangers are embedded in the urban fabric of large and small cities across the country. Unlike Jordan and Turkey (the other two main hosts of displaced Syrians), Lebanon has a policy of non-encampment which gives Syrians the freedom to settle in cities and work in a small number of low-skilled occupations (Sanyal 2017). But, despite this relative freedom, the situation for Syrians throughout Lebanon remains difficult, and often dire. There are significant shortages of housing, educational and job opportunities, and decent public services and utilities (UNHCR 2018). Those Syrians who do work are constrained to livelihoods that are precarious, poorly paid and alienating, with long hours and limited time for rest or leisure. Tensions between refugees and hosts are also an issue, especially in areas where the local Lebanese are facing similar shortages in housing, jobs and decent wages. While Syrians were often received with hospitality at the outset of the conflict (Christophersen *et al.* 2013), after a number of years of ‘crisis’, the Lebanese public has started to have ‘hosting fatigue’, and to see the refugees as overstaying their welcome and becoming ‘a burden’ on the country’s already strained infrastructure (Fakhoury 2017: 686, Knudsen 2017: 136). The result has been an increasingly tense environment, culminating in fear of harassment and abuse in

public spaces, as well as social disengagement from the public realm (DeJong *et al.* 2017, Harb & Saab 2014, Knudsen 2018: 108–9).

However, within these challenging circumstances there are opportunities to develop spaces and practices of shared prosperity. One way to do this, as we argue in this article, is through co-designed and inclusive infrastructural interventions. Such interventions must be inclusive in the sense that they are based on principles of plurality, openness and accessibility, as Amin suggests, but they must also be co-designed in a way in which local residents—both hosts and refugees—make key decisions about what is needed to meet local priorities. The practice of co-design has a number of significant benefits: it ensures that interventions are responsive to locally relevant issues; it presents an opportunity for people from diverse cultural and social backgrounds to collaborate; and it supports people's agency by ensuring that local residents make the key decisions and take ownership of the final product. This approach is fundamentally different from larger projects of infrastructural development in Lebanon because it generates specific forms of affective engagement not just between the people involved in the co-design, but also between the participants and the urban environment.

In the remainder of this article we present two examples of different forms of engagement with work and with the urban environment in Lebanon. In the first example we draw on Ziad Kalthoum's (2018) film *Taste of Cement* as a case study of the affective engagement with the city experienced by Syrian workers on a high-rise construction site in Beirut. We then contrast this to our second example, which is a much smaller and more modest initiative—a participatory spatial intervention (PSI) in the Lebanese town of Bar Elias organised by a British Academy-funded project in which the authors took part. By comparing case studies from an award-winning non-fiction film and a PSI, we aim to build productive research dialogue between the arts and social sciences, as well as between researchers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and members of the public. Displacement in Lebanon since 2011 has received attention from a range of stakeholders, including artists, poets, film-makers, academics, and NGOs. Collaborative work and dialogue across disciplinary silos, however, is not very common, and this, in our view, amounts to a missed opportunity to convey ideas in a rich and powerful fashion. In response to this, we bring together discussion of film, research, and practice on the ground. We argue that a participatory approach to urban design with a focus on social diversity, even for very small infrastructural interventions, can have a powerful impact on building people's capacity to positively engage with one another in building a better city. Genuinely co-designed, inclusive interventions, in other words, can provide us with a glimpse of what is possible when it comes to collaborative action for a shared urban prosperity.

## DETACHMENT FROM THE CITY

In his 2017 film *Taste of Cement*, director Ziad Kalthoum reveals the silent ways in which construction workers on a Beirut high rise go about their work, day in and day out. The workers build Beirut before dizzying views of the sea and at night, retreat into the underground spaces of the unfinished building. Their only connection to the outside world is mediated by the screens of their phones and televisions, on which they witness the destruction caused by the war in Syria. There is a poetic disjunction between the visuals and the voice-over, in which the narrator recalls his father going to Lebanon and working in construction. We learn that the father was part of the first generation of Syrian builders who began the reconstruction of Lebanon in the 1990s following the end of the Lebanese Civil War.

But as this generation of Syrian workers were rebuilding Lebanon, in 2011 their lives became transformed by war and destruction in their own home country. Thus, the Lebanese Civil War, whose remnants continue to recall its memory in Beirut's cityscape, is set up in the film as the mirror image of the ongoing Syrian conflict. While Syrians are building another country, their own homes are destroyed just across the border. Yet the building boom in Lebanon is not building prosperity for the Lebanese public either. Luxury towers like those built by the film's protagonists are often empty, benefitting only a few and acting as a highly visible symbol of a politics of inequality and clientelism that is often blamed for the country's ongoing infrastructural crisis (cf. Krijnen & Fawaz 2010).

The camerawork by Talal Khoury highlights the gulf between the predicament of the workers, on the one hand, and Beirut's out-of-reach promise of the good life, on the other. Khoury's 'dazzling shots of individual workers set against and above the vastness of the city' (Pipolo 2018) suggest that, while they build the city, it does not give them anything in return. While they move across the tallest points of the city they are visible, but they remain silent and anonymous and never leave the structure they build. The construction workers appear to be hiding in plain sight and confined in a prison they have constructed themselves. As the title suggests, the substance with which they have the most intimate contact is cement—the constituent matter of building sites as well as ruins—which encapsulates the concurrent construction and destruction that makes up their lives. Cement becomes the substance through which the city seeps into the workers' subjectivity, but the construction workers themselves can never become part of the city.

In Kalthoum's film, then, Syrian workers are literally building the city while being physically excluded from its life. However, construction work is not the only economic sector in which Syrians work, and the physically and psychologically alienating labour depicted in *Taste of Cement* is not the only way through which Syrians engage with



the city. As recent research has shown, other job markets allow Syrians to enter into different kinds of engagements with urban life, and to make different kinds of contribution to city-making, namely as workers and proprietors of food and retail businesses (Harb *et al.* 2019), as food delivery drivers (Monroe 2014, Fawaz, Salamé, *et al.* 2018), or as taxi drivers and concierges of apartment blocks. Despite locally imposed curfews on refugees in many places throughout the country (Traboulsi & Adnan 2018), Syrians in Lebanon have become so heavily embedded in service provision that they have become part of the human ‘infrastructure’ that makes the city function (cf. Simone 2004). Thus, in contrast to narratives which view refugees as drains on local resources and passive recipients of aid, Fawaz, Gharbieh, *et al.* (2018) have argued that we must ‘recognize the agency of individuals who against all odds are capable of intervening as active city-makers’.

Yet, in both cases—whether they build the physical structures of the city without interacting with other urban dwellers, or whether they deliver services that keep cities going—Syrians in Lebanon do not reap sufficient benefits from infrastructural service provision. Seven years into the crisis, shelter conditions have deteriorated, access to clean drinking water and proper sanitation is limited, and electrical supply is intermittent for most (UNICEF, UNHCR & WFP 2018). To ensure that their basic needs are met despite their insecure legal status and the no-camp policy, many must access services informally from providers who profiteer from their precarious position.

### INFRASTRUCTURAL EXCLUSION

The inequality and exclusion discussed above have important implications not only for the economic and material dimension of urban life, but also for the experiences of oneself and others as agents within larger visions of shared prosperity. Here, we must return to the theoretical issue of subjectivity in order to understand the ways in which infrastructures and infrastructure-related practices produce and reproduce specific forms of self–other relations. On the level of the material, access to infrastructure sets the parameters of people’s quality of life, as well as their capabilities for different kinds of activities. Infrastructures such as housing, transport, internet technology, energy, waste and water systems, and public spaces determine not only whether people live in a safe and healthy environment, but also whether they can access opportunities and physically connect with others (Graham & Marvin 2001, Rodgers & O’Neill 2012).

On the level of subjectivity, however, access to infrastructure is closely related to fantasies and aspirations for the good life. Infrastructures, as Brian Larkin suggests, can inspire specific visions of modernity and progress—they ‘create a sensing of modernity ..., a process by which the body, as much as the mind, apprehends what it

is to be modern, mutable, and progressive' (2013: 337). Larkin further argues that the 'deeply affectual relation people have to infrastructures—the senses of awe and fascination they stimulate—is an important part of their political effect' (2013: 334). Clearly, these statements are mostly relevant to very specific infrastructural projects—the ones that are able to inspire 'awe' perhaps in virtue of their impressive size, state-of-the-art technology, or extraordinary display of wealth. But whether infrastructures constitute a feat of modernity, or more modest undertakings of basic services (for example, decent housing, public spaces, reliable power and water systems), they are always caught up in representations and questions about access and entitlement. Who are they for? What kinds of people are entitled to them and in what capacity? What does it mean to be entitled to them or not?

Access and entitlement to 'modern' infrastructure allow the subject to fashion itself as a 'modern' subject, whereby modernity is a symbol of status that is defined and sustained first and foremost in opposition to the non-'modern'. The underside of this is that people who face infrastructural exclusion—not just from conspicuous flagship projects of modernity, but also from more basic provisions—are often tainted by the stigma of backwardness and even deemed unworthy of urban citizenship. This dynamic is particularly visible in instances of inadequate access to housing, health care, nutrition and sanitation (among other things), whereby the markers of inequality become inscribed onto, and embodied by, the subject in his or her appearance, hygiene and demeanour.

As Matthew Gandy (2005) argues, the infrastructural provisions on which we have come to rely for hygiene, warmth, light, and other essential needs, can act as a kind of 'exoskeleton' of the human body. Similarly, for Judith Butler (2016), the always-vulnerable human body is fundamentally characterised by what she calls 'dependency on infrastructure'—including both human and non-human support systems. Thinking of infrastructural circuits as extensions of our bodily selves invokes how intimately connected we are to the city at large, and why the disruption of these infrastructural connections may result in physical and social harm. Exclusion from the city's circulations is experienced on a somatic level in the form of exhaustion, physical danger, and revulsion with dirty surroundings and disease. At the same time, however, those who are excluded can evoke emotional responses of fear and disgust from others, which in turn can be used to justify the very exclusions that lead to the emotional responses in the first place (cf. Baumann 2018). As Butler (2004, 2010: 3, 33) argues, vulnerability is an ontological condition—everyone is vulnerable through their embodied exposure to the world and the others in it. However, this condition can be managed, transformed and exacerbated through practices of inequality and infrastructural exclusion, whereby vulnerability becomes an issue of the everyday politics in the city.

For Syrians in Lebanon, exclusion from citizenship rights, public service provision and urban life has become part of the predicament of refuge since 2011. For the construction workers in *Taste of Cement*, the prospect of gaining recognition as valued urban citizens is completely out of reach—they are not only economically unable to participate in urban life, they are also physically prevented from doing so by long working hours within the confines of the construction site. However, Syrians who are physically embedded in the city and move through it for various kinds of informal labour also face exclusion. Underfunded physical and social infrastructure throughout Lebanon's poorer regions, as well as an overall shortage of well-paid jobs, has prompted protectionist policies and practices that effectively deny refugees equal rights to the city and equal access to the job market. This has pushed many Syrians—especially those with limited or no resources—to a life of informal work, including waste picking and begging (see Saleh 2016, 2017, Saleh & Zakar 2018). The fact that many of these informal livelihoods are associated with poor hygiene has contributed to a culture of collective negative stereotyping of Syrians, which supports their marginal social and economic position.

Being in a vulnerable position, however, forces people to be resilient—to manage a livelihood in circumstances of extreme social and economic duress. This resilience, however, has given rise to inflated stereotypes of Syrians as super-resilient, which are also used to justify exclusion and exploitation. As ethnographic work on Syrian labour in Lebanon shows, both the young refugee waste-pickers rummaging through rubbish bins all over Beirut and the construction workers pouring cement high in the city's skyline are rendered as super-resilient in a rather denigrating fashion. Representations of Syrians as super-resilient are part and parcel of the everyday marginalising practices at work and in the city. Elizabeth Saleh (2016) makes this point in her ethnography of young scrap metal collectors who search for valuables through Beirut's waste bins and bring whatever they find back to their team's scrapyards. As Saleh noticed during her fieldwork, while people who lived in proximity to the scrapyards objected to the waste and pollutants that its workers brought to the neighbourhood, they also believed that the young men working there were less susceptible to the dangers of poor sanitation:

local residents explained that (Syrians) had a very different sense of hygiene: 'They are not like you or me. When we are sick we go to the doctor or pharmacy. They don't take medicine (...) they don't really need it (...) be careful getting too close to them (...)' ...[B]y implying that Syrian standards of hygiene were compatible with working in close proximity to garbage, Lebanese residents legitimized the labour of Master Cockroach [the head of the scrapyards] and his team (Saleh 2016: 103).

Saleh's description of how derogatory stereotypes of immunity and bodily resilience are used to legitimate dangerous and unsanitary forms of labour resembles the narratives of resilience that employers gave for hiring Syrians in construction and other jobs even before 2011. As Chalcraft writes,

Syrian workers [are said] to hold regional, sectarian, or ethnic identities that supposedly render them ready for hard work and exploitation. Syrian Kurds, in particular, were reputed by some to be tough and indefatigable workers, their racial stock and minority status in Syria purportedly endowing them with strong constitutions and formidable stamina (Chalcraft 2009: 159).

In both of these cases—that of the informal waste picker and of the long-labouring construction worker—there is a self-perpetuating cycle of exclusion. On the one hand, exclusion from physical and social infrastructures creates vulnerabilities that force people to be super-resilient in order to survive. Yet, at the same time, the stereotypes of super-resilience generated by such practices are used to justify, legitimate and naturalise socio-economic regimes of power and exclusion.

The circulations of stereotypes and the emotional responses they evoke undergird lines of separation between refugees and host communities, as well as between refugees and the city's formal infrastructures and labour markets. But experiences of social and economic vulnerability are shared by Lebanese people struggling with lack of jobs, poor wages, and infrastructural development projects that pay little attention to local needs. Lebanon's massive income inequality suggests that the poorest Lebanese are not necessarily better off than their Syrian counterparts. As one recent study found, in the period from 2005 to 2014, the richest 1 per cent of Lebanon's population received on average 23 per cent of the national income, while the bottom 50 per cent received approximately half of the income that went to the 1 per cent (Assouad 2017: 10). Furthermore, according to a World Bank estimate, approximately 350,000 Lebanese live on less than US\$1 per day, in addition to 350,000 Syrians in Lebanon who struggle with meeting the basic requirements of food and shelter (Kukrety & Al Jamal 2016: 32). In this context, one of the big challenges since the post-2011 influx has been competition for jobs and resources between poor Lebanese and Syrians (Christopherson *et al.* 2013), but this has taken place in an economic climate where many of the country's big infrastructural investments has not translated into prosperity for the wider Lebanese public.

The double challenge of inequality and large-scale displacement raises the issue of what, if anything, can be done to redress the intersecting forms of social division through infrastructural projects that deliver on prosperity goals for local residents. What does it take for diverse publics—including hosts and refugees—to collaborate and work together towards the shared goal of improving their local area? How could

infrastructural projects engage with communities in ways that speak to their visions of better urban environments? In the following sections we attempt to answer these questions from the perspective of university researchers working with local communities. We argue that a citizen science and participatory planning approach to interventions—albeit small ones—can lead to significant outcomes not just for improving the urban environment itself but also for engaging diverse groups of residents in a way that allows them to take ownership of the design process and of the city itself.

### A CITIZEN SOCIAL SCIENCE APPROACH

The question of impact has been at the forefront of recent debates in the social sciences. Ensuring that research makes original contributions to academic and public knowledge is still essential, but in addition to this there have been widespread calls from academics, universities and funders, to expand the impact of research to more diverse and concrete outcomes that contribute to the public good. One way of responding to this call is to bring members of communities into the research process and to involve them in various stages along the way including design, data collection and data analysis. This approach offers possibilities to reconfigure the practice of research and to challenge the traditionally hierarchical relationship between academic researchers and the people whom they study. There is now a substantial body of literature about methods that involve non-professional researchers from the communities where the work takes place (Edwards & Alexander 2011, Hecker *et al.* 2018, Koné *et al.* 2000, Maiter *et al.* 2008, Mosavel *et al.* 2011). There have also been a number of proposed terms to designate this approach including ‘community research’, ‘participatory research’, ‘peer research’ and—our preferred term—‘citizen science’.

Involvement of non-professional researchers has a number of identified benefits, which vary depending on the objectives of the project and the agenda of its academic team. Improved access to data is often cited as a key benefit because members of the local communities are likely to have valuable contacts, cultural knowledge and familiarity with the local social landscape that the ‘outsider’ academic often lacks (e.g., Edwards & Alexander 2011: 277). In addition to this—and in our view, far more importantly—working with citizen scientists can lead to various outcomes for the community itself and for its relationship to research. Garnett *et al.* (2009), for example, identify four potential benefits, or rather principles that must be followed, of participatory research methods: (1) ‘secure engagement’ between local residents and researchers, (2) ‘enhanced local capacity’, (3) ‘effective implementation of research results’ and (4) ‘greater equity in intellectual power-sharing’ (2009: 571).

Organising citizen science research along these principles can open up opportunities for concrete positive impact by building local capacities and locally embedding the research findings from the outset of the project (and not, as is often done, as a secondary measure at its conclusion). In addition to this, we would emphasise the importance of engaging with the community at large (and not just individual researchers), as well as strengthening the networks between academic researchers, citizen scientists and local stakeholders, such as NGOs and local governments. Such additional engagement efforts can ensure that the research is clearly linked to local priorities, and readily available to those who can use it to inform their initiatives for improving quality of life.

But running a successful citizen science project requires a sustained effort to train, work with, and collaborate with the citizen scientists as members of the overall research team. Incorporating the citizen scientists' voices and input along the way and allowing them to shape the overall research process is crucial here, not only because of their advanced knowledge of local issues, but also because this enables them to become the agents of the research that is intended to benefit them in the first place. An engaged citizen science approach is thus fundamentally different from the common practice of hiring 'data collectors', who are often brought in from outside of the communities they study and whose involvement in the research is usually limited in terms of personal commitment, duration and ability to influence the design.

The difference between sustained collaboration with citizens scientist researchers and the hiring of data collectors is a significant one, with important consequences for the quality of data as well as for the impact of the research. But just how critical this difference is, for both researchers and communities, is often underestimated if not completely overlooked. In the summer of 2017, one of the authors (Mintchev) co-convened a workshop on this theme in Beirut with colleagues from Lebanon and the United Kingdom (see RELIEF Centre 2017). The aim of the event was to explore the landscape of existing projects, opportunities and experiences of engaging communities in research. The workshop invited a range of participants from across Lebanon that included NGOs and academics with a history of hiring researchers, as well as people who had been hired as researchers and were willing to share their stories. One of the key findings that emerged from the workshop discussion was that there was a tremendous sense of frustration among many field researchers as a result of inflexible and inadequate protocols. While, on the one hand, research organisations felt that local researchers tended to lack the necessary skills for robust data collection, the field researchers pointed to lack of support, training and adequate supervision on behalf of the organisations. Adding to this, they shared stories of feeling frustrated, embarrassed, and at times even threatened, because they had to read questions from a clipboard which both they and their respondents knew to be either inadequate or

culturally inappropriate. The rigidity of the process, however, prevented them from addressing these issues. The result was firstly that they themselves felt inadequate, and secondly that the research respondents became disengaged and overcome by ‘research fatigue’. The outcome of data collection, we were told, was a frustrated researcher, poor data which didn’t resonate with people’s concerns and disgruntled respondents who were asked to dedicate time to answering often-irrelevant structured questions with no expectation of future benefits.

### CO-DESIGN IN BAR ELIAS

Within this context of disengaged research practices, as well as widespread inequality and detachment in relation to urban infrastructure, we took part in a project aiming to develop pathways towards redressing these issues.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, members of the project (Andrea Rigon, Hanna Baumann and Howayda Al-Harithy, in collaboration with the NGO CatalyticAction<sup>2</sup>) led on a co-designed spatial intervention in the Lebanese town of Bar Elias. As a refugee-hosting town in the Beqaa Valley, near Lebanon’s border with Syria, Bar Elias has seen its population double since 2011.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the town is classified by the UN as ‘high pressure’ in terms of the potential for social instability (Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon 2015). And indeed, while Bar Elias has been welcoming towards Syrians, there are also reports of tensions between refugees and hosts, in particular because the presence of the displaced has significantly altered public spaces, such as street-side markets and parks (Ullrich 2018). As a result of this, recent UNDP projects have been targeting locations like Bar Elias with large-scale infrastructure projects, which are presumed to alleviate the social pressure and potential for political instability (UNDP 2018, Aktis 2016). While the infrastructural

<sup>1</sup>This is the British Academy-supported project ‘Public Services and Vulnerability in the Lebanese Context of Large-scale Displacement’.

<sup>2</sup>CatalyticAction is a charity, registered in England and Wales, that works to empower communities through strategic and innovative community-led spatial interventions. The CatalyticAction PSI team is: Joana Dabaj, Riccardo Conti, Ramona Abdallah and Giulia Galli. More information can be found at <http://www.catalyticaction.org>.

<sup>3</sup>It should be noted that reliable demographic information is notoriously difficult to come by in Lebanon. However, according to a high-ranking source at Bar Elias Municipality, 30,000 locals (including 7,500 Palestinians) and 60,000 Syrians lived in the town in mid-2018. The same official claimed that during the high point of the refugee crisis the ratio was three to one. A more recent publication (Ullrich 2018: 6) cites reversed statistics for Bar Elias: 60,000 to 70,000 Lebanese and between 31,000 and 45,000 Syrian refugees. According to UNHCR, Bar Elias had only 31,505 registered refugees as of February 2018 (UNHCR, 2018. Map: Registered Refugees in Bekaa & Baalbek-Hermel)— but it should be noted that a large proportion of refugees are not registered.

and environmental crisis that preceded the arrival of Syrian refugees continues in the area, the town has seen significant infrastructural investment from a variety of international donors.

The technocratic equation assuming that increased infrastructural investment will lower the potential for conflict between refugees and hosts, however, is somewhat simplistic, as UN representatives acknowledged in interviews.<sup>4</sup> Rather than a zero-sum game in which residents fight over scarce resources, the politics of living with difference require civic feelings anchored in joint aspirations. As Amin (2012) argues, these social relations are mediated by, and sometimes manifested in, material structures and the built environment. Ideally, these can serve as symbols of common projects. Perhaps even more importantly, the process through which residents arrive at common projects shape the way in which living with diversity is imagined in light of community members' differing needs.

Thus, our work in Bar Elias aimed to research, reflect upon and discuss how vulnerabilities created by public services (or lack thereof) are shared, and how they can be jointly addressed to benefit both refugees and hosts. By working together with CatalyticAction—a charity and design studio with long-term engagement with the town and residents of Bar Elias—the project was able to reach a wide range of participants, many of whom took part in the design—and will continue to participate in the construction and activation—of a Participatory Spatial Intervention (PSI) for a total of ten months.<sup>5</sup>

Following the recruitment and training of local citizen scientists,<sup>6</sup> this collaborative work was initiated through a one-week workshop to identify different public spaces, their uses and users. Based on this, the entrance road to the city was identified as the site of the spatial intervention because it is the only space consistently used by all groups residing in Bar Elias. At the core of the process was a second seven-day participatory design workshop with citizen scientists as well as twelve other participants from the Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian communities. Like citizen scientists,

<sup>4</sup>The interviews and discussions in question took part in the summer and fall of 2018 as part of the research for this project. We are omitting detail about the name of the interviewee and their specific organisation to protect their anonymity.

<sup>5</sup>For a short video summarising the activities of the early stages of the PSI, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYr9dSr6tyo>.

<sup>6</sup>As part of the recruitment, advertisements were posted in online form and circulated via local organisations and stakeholders such as the municipality and the Nasser club. Thirty-five applications were reviewed, eighteen candidates were shortlisted for interviews, each interview was ranked according to the candidate's skills and motivation to participate in the project, and seven local researchers aged 19–44 were ultimately selected: three Palestinians (1F, 2M), two Syrians (1F, 1M) and two Lebanese (1F, 1M). CatalyticAction trained the local team on research methods, ethics (adapting the IGP's citizen science approach) and spatial research and design thinking.



workshop participants were recruited to reflect the diversity (including nationality, gender, age and socio-economic status) of Bar Elias residents.<sup>7</sup>

Jointly, participants and researchers learned about and researched the infrastructural conditions of the site and the various intersectional vulnerabilities that these generate and manifest. Citizen scientists were trained in social science research methods and ethics, as well as in concepts such as intersectionality and power relations that shape vulnerabilities. They led smaller groups of workshop participants as the town became their research site for several days: the groups carried out on-site observation on three points along the main road at two times of the day, as well as participatory mapping with passers-by, and semi-structured interviews ( $n = 18$ ) with shopkeepers and users of public space. During the participatory mapping and interviews each subgroup was asked to regularly pause and reflect on whether the people they were engaging represented the diversity of the town's residents, ensuring the group would make efforts to have a diverse and representative sample. Each subgroup analysed its results and presented findings to the wider group in an iterative process to understand the site in depth. They then discussed the relationship between the infrastructural conditions of the town and the wider problems of jobs and resources, social relations, pollution, health and safety of public spaces. They developed 'problem tree' diagrams, exploring and visualising the underlying causes of local vulnerabilities and their effects on different groups of people. The discussions highlighted the positionality of various participants and allowed the group to reflect on how people are differently affected by infrastructural deficits, based on their status and existing vulnerabilities. Participants were then asked to build a broad vision of their ideal town by imagining the perfect place for them and their families. This process allowed participants to experiment with different media, including poetry and drawing, and identify a shared vision without eliminating individual differences. The subsequent step was to begin formulating potential solutions that would address the causes of the vulnerability through 'solution tree' diagrams, reflecting on who would be positively affected by these solutions and how. The final step was to translate these broader solutions into small-scale interventions in the identified public space. This required additional spatial training, where each participant was given a satellite map and pictures of all the sections of the intervention site, and invited to draw his or her proposed interventions first individually, and then in groups. Each group exhibited its solutions and a discussion followed to mutually understand different rationalities.

<sup>7</sup>Citizen scientists assisted in the recruitment of unpaid workshop participants, who were also selected to reflect a range of socio-economic backgrounds: twelve participants from 19 to 65 years of age: two Palestinian (2F), four Syrian (2F, 2M), and six Lebanese (3F, 3M).

One recurrent challenge of working in contexts of poverty and social exclusion is that residents' adaptive preferences gravitate towards solutions that address immediate needs. For this reason, the participatory process sought to cultivate residents' 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2004), by working on individual and shared aspirations and visions for their family and the city. Therefore, in the participatory process, solutions were designed as a way to address residents' vulnerabilities while at the same time contributing towards the achievement of their shared vision of the city.

The research from the workshop led to a number of proposals. These included proposals for improved safety mechanisms, such as traffic lights, pedestrian crossings and disability ramps, as well as constructions such as street shading, benches and bus stop shelters that protect from sun and rain, and thus increase the use of the only public road that is regularly shared by different communities. There were also proposals for beautification and signage that would build a sense of shared local identity and responsibility, and wider programmatic proposals, such as a park with a playground that would serve as an inter-communal meeting space. The spatial interventions which will be built on the basis of these proposals are intended to improve opportunities for inter-group relations, foster pride in the town, and enrich the wellbeing of users of the road (including children and people living with disabilities).

Findings of the week-long research and the proposals that were developed were then presented to the public in an interactive exhibition on the main road. During this exhibition, which lasted two and a half hours following Friday prayers when foot traffic in the area was high, passers-by and research participants who had been invited and encouraged to bring friends and family along were invited to provide feedback. The written and oral comments from dozens of respondents, including children and the town's mayor, were then pooled, collectively analysed by all workshop participants and later incorporated into the design brief provided to CatalyticAction for translation into technical designs. A main point of criticism included the fact that the areas around informal tented settlements for Syrian refugees, which are located around the outskirts of Bar Elias, are in need of more improvement than the town centre, especially as many lack paved roads. Yet the participants viewed it as important to work on an area that served all residents of the town equally.

CatalyticAction translated these proposals into technical designs which were presented back to the residents in December for feedback. Some of these proposals will be realised later this year (2019) through a process of community-engaged construction—after which citizen scientists will monitor the impact of the interventions on the everyday rhythms and interactions in the town, using the intervention as a starting point for further research and catalysing greater impact. However, and more importantly, the process sought to contribute to residents' capacity to work together across diversity in designing and making their city, to identify the needs of different

individuals and groups, and to gain an improved understanding of how infrastructural interventions respond (or not) to these different needs. These outcomes are an important part of the PSI, but in order to be sustained in the future they require a committed effort of engagement from researchers and other stakeholders. A single PSI project might be beneficial on its own terms, but it is limited in duration and in scope. For this reason we see this PSI as only one part of a larger ecology of engagement and processes of collaborative initiatives, not just by the research team and CatalyticAction, but also by other stakeholders in Bar Elias.

While the PSI was introduced as a way of putting people and their knowledge at the centre of the development process, we must acknowledge that participatory processes are always to some extent driven by what David Mosse (2005) terms ‘participation experts’ with skills and experience in promoting participation. This is an inevitable paradox in the process of catalysing participation, and the best way to address it is by recognising the role of expertise in the facilitation process rather than working with romanticised ideas of what participation entails. More recent research has also emphasised the importance of facilitators’ awareness of intra-community power imbalances in order to prevent elite capture which has affected many participatory projects (Mansuri & Rao 2013, Rigon 2014). Conscious of this challenge, the citizen scientists continuously checked that they were reaching a diverse range of residents based on nationality, as well as gender, age and profession. Noting and mapping the specific neighbourhoods that participants came from was also important for ensuring that people from different parts of the city were evenly represented. Moreover, the workshop was structured with small group discussions and opportunities for individual input in order to build an inclusive space. This methodological approach, together with our collaboration with a diverse team of citizen scientists, encouraged collaboration across social boundaries and challenged established social divides.

By collectively conducting research in a diverse group environment characterised by inter-group tensions, participants noted that this was the first time that locals (understood here as Lebanese and Palestinians, most of whom have lived in the town for decades) and displaced Syrians worked on a common project. The discussions with residents and citizen scientists about public services in Bar Elias and its surrounding informal refugee settlements revealed some misconceptions about the services that other residents benefit from. This allowed participants to form a clearer picture of the wider infrastructural challenges of the town, including the ones faced by all communities, as well as those particular to certain groups or areas. The discussions thus led to an understanding and articulation of individual and shared vulnerabilities that echoed the aforementioned relational understanding of vulnerability espoused by Butler (2004, 2016). On the one hand, certain individuals and

groups had particular needs not currently catered to in the urban environment—and these were not always captured by institutional definitions of vulnerability or eligibility for aid. Displaced people, torn out of their support systems, were understood to be especially vulnerable because they were able to draw on fewer resources to deal with shocks. Thinking about vulnerability in this manner required citizen scientists and workshop participants to engage with the point of view of others in order to understand their infrastructural needs. On the other hand, the research process highlighted the way in which local concerns were often shared. This was done despite the fact that such concerns had been frequently presented as issues of intercommunal division, leading to accusations that others overstretch local services. To use one example, since all residents relied on the water of the nearby Litani river, everyone was affected when insufficient water and sanitation facilities were provided to refugee settlements, leading to the river's increased pollution and eventual impact on food hygiene. By focussing the discussion on their mutual interdependence, participants' narratives highlighted the need for a common infrastructure to manage and improve the town's shared spaces and common resources. At the time of writing (early 2019), the infrastructural intervention has not yet been built and the ways in which it will affect daily life remain to be seen. What this case study emphasises, however, is that the process of participation and the mode of engagement it entails is crucial for how people experience their relation to one another and to their city.

## CONCLUSION

The Government of Lebanon views the presence of displaced Syrians as an additional pressure on the country's already strained infrastructural system (Government of Lebanon 2018). Yet at the same time, the Syrian crisis has also brought a large amount of international funding into Lebanon, in particular through UN agencies, with promises of longer-term, large-scale infrastructural investment made at the April 2018 CEDRE conference in Paris. The Capital Investment Plan introduced at this event, and later supported by the World Bank (Harake & Kostopoulos 2018), aims to create short-term jobs for displaced Syrians in the infrastructure construction sector (Government of Lebanon 2018). Syrians will thus be employed once again to build the physical systems of public service delivery.

But, despite their role in public services and infrastructure construction, Syrians are hardly seen as future beneficiaries of this project, save for the short-term employment opportunities that they will have access to. What is more, neither the Syrians, nor the Lebanese public has a say in how newly built infrastructures will be designed or delivered. The decision-making process is not only top-heavy, but has also been

criticised for failing to consider the existing needs, practices and networks on the ground that can maximise the benefit of the new projects. As the distinguished academic Mona Fawaz has written, the CEDRE plans

confuse infrastructure development with project contracting. They reduce infrastructure to a list of big-ticket items, and conflate the notion of ‘national development’ with the construction of individual highways, dams, sewage treatment plants, power plants, fiber optic networks, and air and sea ports. ... Lebanese infrastructure heavily relies on informal networks of service provision tied to vested interests and supporting countless livelihoods. Experience has shown the value of building on these networks and, where possible, upgrading and integrating them into official forms of service provision (Fawaz 2018).

This critique raises serious questions about the extent to which financial investment in infrastructure is translating into better quality of life and putting both Lebanese and Syrians on a pathway to future prosperity. It also raises questions about the degree to which such investment will alleviate the growing tensions and competition for limited resources between hosts and refugees. While current large-scale infrastructural investments appear to seek to offset the effects of the refugee crisis, it is unlikely that they will succeed in achieving this unless the public at large is the main beneficiary. Without concrete improvements to people’s lives—through building ‘foundational’ economies and ‘grounded cities’ as discussed above—narratives about ‘burden,’ ‘pressure’ and ‘strain’ will likely exacerbate Lebanon’s existing inequalities, leaving few prospects for a shared prosperous future that people can aspire to.

But in order to achieve adequate delivery of services, as Fawaz (2018) suggest, infrastructural projects must be connected to Lebanon’s political, economic and social realities. Otherwise, the country will continue to see cases such as those of foreign-funded waste-sorting plants being built but never utilised for the benefit of the population whose health is increasingly threatened by untreated garbage. In Lebanon’s context of displacement—where competition for resources and host–refugee tensions are a significant issue—efforts to improve quality of life for Lebanese citizens are impossible to separate from efforts to address the displacement crisis. Planning and designing infrastructural projects that work for everyone, while taking into account the voices, needs and experiences of people (in addition to offering them employment) can create more engaging, responsive, and efficient services that work for everyone. As our example from Bar Elias aims to show, small-scale, localised interventions can offer a powerful opportunity for bringing diverse groups of people together and working collectively towards meaningful urban change. Whether or not larger infrastructural projects can and will incorporate participatory principles into their future practices remains to be seen. In either case, localised initiatives and interventions—regardless of the scale—must continue to build partnership with communities on the

ground, and they must also ensure that these partnerships are based on principles of engagement and dialogue. In today's world of inequality, conflict and migration, collaborating with others is critical for moving forward. This is something that we should all strive to commit to if we are ever going to build a more prosperous shared future.

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